

# Major Search and Rescue Incidents on Mount Rainier, 1997

## **DEMARRE SAR**

On the afternoon of May 5th, Aaron Demarre went on a hike from Paradise to Camp Muir for a snowboard descent. Before reaching Camp Muir, bad weather moved in and Demarre decided to head back down before getting lost. While descending on his snowboard, Demarre became disoriented and lost in a white-out. When Aaron did not come home that evening his roommate notified Mt. Rainier communications of his absence and plans that day.

A hasty search team was assembled to begin searching the next morning. Rangers Gauthier and Yelverton searched the Muir Snowfield while rangers Kirschner and Zalinka checked the eastern fall-line for signs of Demarre. Weather conditions during the search included strong winds, blowing snow and poor visibility. Gauthier's team arrived at Camp Muir late on May 6th without finding any clues and Kirschner's team met with similar results and returned from the field that evening. Stormy conditions persisted through the night but subsided some by the next morning.

On May 7th the search was intensified with a request for a helicopter and 30 people, including NPS employees and Tacoma Mountain Rescue volunteers, to search the Muir Snowfield, Paradise glacier, Nisqually drainage and the Paradise area. By mid morning, the weather had significantly improved and Demarre was contacted by Tacoma Mountain Rescue while snowboarding back to Paradise. Demarre reported feeling fine but was dehydrated and hungry.

### **Analysis:**

Hiking to Camp Muir is probably the most popular day trip in Mt. Rainier National Park. It is also the most common area for climbers, skiers and hikers to become lost. The snow field is difficult to navigate in poor weather without the aid of a compass (map and compass bearings are available and free.) Additionally, the terrain tends to lead disoriented persons into the Nisqually or Paradise drainages which are occupied by glaciers.

Demarre lost his uphill boot track while descending on his snowboard and ended up heading east onto the Paradise and Williwakas glaciers. He managed to descend low enough and take cover in the trees during the worst part of the storm. Demarre did not have any of the ten essentials or over night gear. He walked, dug (with his snowboard) and huddled in the trees to stay warm. When the weather cleared the morning of May 7th, Demarre was able to position himself and return to Paradise. He spent a total of 44 hours outside without any gear or food.

## **BOUVET SAR**

Mt. Rainier communications received a radio call on May 21st from a team of three climber/researchers in the summit crater of Mt. Rainier. The reporting party, Francois LeGuern leader of a French research team, indicated that one of his members was suffering from Acute Mountain Sickness (A.M.S.) LeGuern reported that Eric Bouvet, exhibited symptoms of vomiting, insomnia and general malaise with an increase in severity over the last 24 hours. Bouvet was part of a film crew that was documenting volcanic research.

LeGuern's team spent the previous four days on the summit conducting research and sleeping in the steam caves. During this time, a storm deposited a significant amount of snow on the upper mountain creating an increased avalanche danger. Due to the avalanche hazard and Bouvet's condition, it was decided to evacuate the team from the summit by helicopter.

Approximately 90 minutes after initial contact with LeGuern's team, NPS rangers Kirschner, Gauthier, Yelverton, and Carney were flown to the summit in a military Chinook helicopter. Bouvet was assisted from the research cave, across the crater and into the helicopter. Bouvet was then flown to Madigan Army hospital for evaluation and treatment.

**Analysis:**

LeGuern's party was part of a larger 15 member research and film team, some of whom had limited climbing experience. The team had spent two days acclimatizing at 11,000 feet prior to ascending but Bouvet still suffered from the effects of altitude on the summit, perhaps due to the extended time spent there. It was later determined that Bouvet felt sick prior to ascending but told no one because he thought it was due to the food he ate. Additionally, the snow storm had created an increased avalanche hazard, estimated at moderate to high, preventing the research team from safely descending on their own. Since A.M.S. can lead to further complications and is considered life threatening if untreated, flying Bouvet during the break in the weather was the best option for his safety.

Climbers on Mt. Rainier may feel the effects of altitude but extended acclimatization is generally not required. Most climbs take two days and climbers descend back to sea level before many of the serious symptoms arise. Acclimatization is very difficult because most climbers come from sea-level. Parties that expect to stay at altitude should have a systematic plan of acclimatization. Better communication among party members is stressed, especially with those less experienced who may confuse an upset stomach with A.M.S.

**CATLETT/WILLCOX SAR**

On June 15th, two climbers called on a cell phone to the White River Ranger Station to report that they were pinned down in bad weather on Liberty Cap. Mike Catlett and Don Willcox had successfully climbed Liberty Ridge under favorable weather conditions but were caught in a lenticular cloud once they reached the summit. Unable to find the descent route due to reduced visibility, high winds and accumulating snow, the climbers decided to set up camp and wait out the bad weather. They also indicated that they were low on food, fuel and water and expressed concern about their situation but did not indicate the need for rescue or help.

Conditions remained poor on the upper mountain for the next 24 hours and the party again called White River Ranger Station on June 16th to report that they were out of food and nearly out of fuel. They felt the situation was not urgent however they believed that they would not be ambulatory if they had to go another day in similar conditions. The weather forecast called for continued high winds and cloudy conditions for the next two days.

On June 17th, a ground team was sent to Camp Schurman to attempt a climb of the Emmons glacier in hopes of reaching the stranded climbers. This team reported steady 50 mph winds with gusts to 75 mph at Camp Schurman (9,500 ft.) Later that day, another team of rangers on helicopter stand by was able to fly to Liberty Cap during a brief weather window. A "drop bag" containing emergency supplies was prepared for jettison to the climbers but extreme winds prevented the helicopter from nearing them and the mission was aborted.

No communication was established with the climbers after June 17th and on June 18th the ground team reported a break in the weather. The helicopter was launched again and successfully inserted four rangers on the saddle between Liberty Cap and the true summit where they hiked to Catlett and Willcox and assisted them back to the landing zone for pickup. Catlett and Willcox were then flown to Madigan Army hospital where they were treated for severe dehydration and evaluated for possible renal complications.

**Analysis:**

Catlett and Willcox became pinned down on the summit due to deteriorating weather. They felt that traveling on an unknown route over glaciers during whiteout conditions might endanger them more and they elected to dig in. Although there were brief periods of clear weather, it was felt that there was no substantial weather window to allow the party to break camp and safely get to a better location. This continued bad weather prevented movement and under recommendation from park personnel, the party stayed put.

It's common for Liberty Ridge climbing parties to carry-over the summit and descend an alternate route. This requires carrying heavy packs up the route and climbers are tempted to pack just enough food and fuel for the proposed length of their trip. Inclement weather can spell disaster for a party that is committed to the route. It is especially important for climbers ascending remote and harder routes on Rainier to carry additional food and fuel for possible stormbound days. This also applies to ascents on standard routes. It's worth noting that weather conditions worsened shortly after the rescue and the mountain experienced extreme winds and cloudy weather for the next four days.

**WENTZER SAR**

On July 20th Mt. Rainier communications received information relating to a 911 call from a climbing party on the Kautz Glacier route. The reporting climber Greg Prothman of Seattle Mountain Rescue called from Camp Hazard (11,300 ft) indicating that a party of three had been hit by falling ice from the Kautz Ice Cliff. One of the climbers, Tim Wentzer, had been seriously injured in the back and was in severe pain. Due to the location of the accident and severity of injuries, an Army Blackhawk was launched with a flight medic and flew directly to Camp Hazard. The medic was lowered to the accident scene and stabilized Wentzer in preparation for a winch raise into the Blackhawk. The Blackhawk flew Wentzer to Harborview trauma center in Seattle for treatment of a fractured C-7 vertebrae, other spinal complications and an injury to the knee.

**Analysis:**

Wentzer's accident occurred in an area aptly called "the chute" due to the amount of falling rock and ice. The "chute" is the safest and fastest approach from Camp Hazard to the popular Kautz Glacier route. Rock and ice fall in "the chute" is inevitable, therefore extreme caution and speed are advised when climbing or descending through this area. Wentzer was unfortunately in the wrong place at the wrong time.

**MCINTYRE SAR**

On the afternoon of July 29<sup>th</sup>, ranger Kellogg was contacted by a climbing party of two descending the Emmons glacier who reported that another team of two had taken a crevasse fall around 13,300 feet. One of the members was reported to be seriously injured, unconscious and was having difficulty breathing. Kellogg relayed the information to White River ranger station and teams were assembled for flight to assist with the rescue. Rangers Gauthier and Kellogg were climbing to the accident from Camp Schurman but were called back to join the other rescuers which were being shuttled to Emmons Flats where they awaited the arrival of a larger helicopter to insert the entire team close to the accident scene. At 7:30 p.m. a team of nine rangers were transported to the summit in an Army Chinook and ranger Brenchley led the hasty team of three to the accident scene to assess the situation while Gauthier organized the remaining rescuers for a technical lowering and possible crevasse extraction with litter. Upon arriving at the crevasse, Brenchley's team found Don McIntyre dead and his partner Joel Koury injured but ambulatory. At this point, the sun was setting and teams were restructured; Brenchley descended with Koury and six other rescuers back to Camp Schurman while Gauthier and Kellogg stayed at the crevasse with McIntyre to begin removal operations early the next morning.

The weather remained good the following day and plans were made to fly Koury and the seven rescuers out of the field while Gauthier and Kellogg prepared McIntyre's body for a hoist operation from 13,300 feet.

Late morning mechanical problems prevented the Army helicopter from flight and a smaller helicopter was used to transport Koury and the team at Camp Schurman to Ranger Airfield. Unable to hoist with a small helicopter at such a high altitude, Gauthier's team secured the body well out of sight and away from the climbing route for an extraction when a suitable helicopter could be obtained.

Weather and the heavy climbing activity prevented helicopter operations for the next five days. On Monday Aug. 4<sup>th</sup>, Rangers Gauthier, Yelverton and Olver were flown to the summit and down climbed to the hoist site. The Army Chinook was able to hoist the body and the team was picked up on the summit.

**Analysis:**

McIntyre and Koury had just climbed Liberty Ridge and were forced to bivouac near the summit of Rainier due to a sudden storm which deposited wet heavy snow on the upper mountain. The team had lost the descent route in the weather and was making their way down the Emmons Glacier when Koury slipped while cleaning the wet snow from his crampons. Unable to arrest quickly in these conditions, Koury slid into McIntyre who was near the edge of the crevasse. Both fell and landed on a ledge system 25 to 30 feet below. McIntyre ruptured his aortic artery and Koury sustained knee, leg and hip injuries. McIntyre died a few hours later due to his injuries.

The upper mountain of Rainier is notorious for sudden and unexpected storms that cover the climbing routes and leave climbers disoriented. The newly deposited wet snow made conditions very slick and was sticking to their crampons. Frequent "banging" with an ice ax was required to clean them and most climbers are unlikely to stop, anchor and then clean their crampons. Due to McIntyre's close proximity to the edge of the crevasse, there was little room for self arrest and a simple fall turned into a serious accident.

**KAPAUN SAR**

On August 3<sup>rd</sup>, Chris Kapaun was glissading un-roped down the Inter Glacier and fell into a crevasse. His partner, Troy Hendrickson witnessed the fall and climbed back to Camp Schurman to report the accident. Rangers Puryear, Kellogg, M. Ronca and C. Ronca responded from the Camp Schurman ranger station with rescue litter and gear. Ranger M. Ronca descended into the crevasse and assessed Kapaun's injuries which included a compound fracture of the arm and possible head injuries. Kapaun had fallen 50 to 70 feet and was not wearing a helmet. With the assistance of other climbers, Kapaun was raised from the crevasse and packaged in a rescue litter. Rangers Gauthier and Olver climbed to the site and began the lowering to meet other ground teams which were assembling in Glacier Basin for a carry out. At the base on the Inter Glacier, Kapaun's injuries were reassessed and it was determined that he could walk out on his own with the aid of rangers.

**Analysis:**

The Inter Glacier is the primary route for climbers and skiers attempting Mt. Rainier's Emmons Glacier. Although the glacier is small by Rainier's comparison, it still has many large crevasses and icy sections and results in one or two rescues every year. It is strongly recommended that climbers (especially those new to the area) rope up during all glacier travel, even on the Inter.

Glissading is a popular descent technique however glacier conditions change weekly and old glissade paths frequently lead to newly exposed crevasses. Kapaun did not check his descent path and was unable to see what was ahead of him while sliding. Although the path may have been crevasse free the week before, that was no longer the case. We strongly recommend that climbers hike down the Inter glacier, or at least check their descent path.

## **CONNELL SAR**

Early on the morning of Sept. 1st, the two person Connell party called Mt. Rainier communications by cell phone to report that they had lost the climbing route in a white out and were unable to find there way up or down the mountain. Without any bivy gear, the party requested a rescue. Rangers Beilstein and Holien were notified at Camp Muir where they prepared for a climb and set out to locate the lost party. After three hours of climbing, the weather cleared and the rangers were able to make contact with them at 12,640 feet. They escorted the team back to their camp at 11,000 feet.

### **Analysis:**

The Connell party was climbing the popular Disappointment Cleaver route which normally has a well established boot track to the summit. It was reported to the party when they registered that storms during the preceding days had covered parts of the route. Carrying only fanny packs, the climbers did not have a map, compass or bivy gear and were unable to help themselves. Poor weather had been predicted and other parties reported seeing them head into the clouds earlier that morning. The route becomes entirely glaciated above 12,300 feet and the climbers were unable to use any ground features for navigation.

Carrying the appropriate gear for a summit climb or day trip is **strongly** recommended, especially when foul weather is predicted and the route is difficult to follow. Although a cell phone enabled the climbers to request help, proper gear including map, compass and wands would have allowed them to find their route back to camp, thus avoiding a need for rescue.

## **BRUNSON SAR**

Mt. Rainier communications received a report of a fallen climber on the Nisqually Glacier from a cell phone call on Sept. 6th. The reporting party, a Seattle Mountaineers instructor, indicated that a climber in his group had fallen during ice climbing practice. The climber, Eric Brunson, was leading a moderate angle ice climb in a popular practice area on the Nisqually glacier. Brunson fell near the top of the climb shortly after placing his last ice screw. Due to soft ice conditions, all of his ice screws pulled out and Brunson fell to the ground, a distance greater than 40 feet. Brunson, who was wearing a helmet, sustained a possible back injury during the fall. His team members then moved him to a less hazardous area and the team called for a rescue.

A Jet Ranger helicopter meet rangers Brenchley and Yelverton at the park helibase and inserted the team near the accident scene in a large serac field where they assessed Brunson's injuries and determined that he should be flown out immediately. Brunson, with a possible broken back, was prepared for flight while his group assisted rangers in preparing a better landing zone to prevent a difficult lowering. The pilot was required to pull power while on one and a half skids as Brunson was loaded into the ship. Brunson was flown to the helibase where he was transferred to an Airlift Northwest helicopter and flown to Harborview Medical Center in Seattle for treatment. His injuries included a compression fracture of T4 and T5 vertebrae and a fractured hip.

### **Analysis:**

Brunson's ice climbing experience was limited and he may not have realized the dubious nature of protection in glacier ice under warm summer conditions. It's also worth noting that he reported feeling "gripped" at the top of his climb and was a little shaky when placing his last screw.

Ice protection is less than optimum even under "perfect" conditions. Scraping away surface slush and using long screws is strongly recommended when leading glacier ice under warm conditions. Confidence in one's abilities, especially in respect to placing gear on lead, is important.

It is also worth mentioning that the Mountaineers group was extremely prepared, having their own litter and descent route marked. Their assistance and preparedness helped to expedite this evacuation.